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Hepburn's Natural Aesthetic and Its Implications for Aesthetic Education

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Abstract

The world is rich in natural beauty, and learning how to appreciate the beauty of nature is an important part of aesthetic education. Unfortunately, the teaching of aesthetics is usually restricted to art education, especially in Taiwan. Students' perceptual awareness of and sensitivity to the aesthetics of nature should be cultivated so that their lives may be enriched and their awareness of environmental issues may be raised. How the aesthetics of nature can be taught effectively remains a question. However, research in the contemporary aesthetics of nature provides insightful discussions and directions. This paper investigates the insights of aesthetician R. Hepburn and their implications for aesthetic education. Hepburn suggests that metaphysical meaning can be revealed by imagination in nature. According to this metaphysical model of the imagination, the essence of the "reality" of nature ought to be contemplated. We can imagine the meaning of life and experience a sense of oneness with nature, a co-presence of opposites, as well as sublimity and infinity by appreciating the beauty of nature. Accordingly, this paper discusses three implications for aesthetic education: 1) To teach students how to appreciate natural beauty should be included in aesthetic education; 2) To rich meanings of life by imagination in natural appreciation; and 3) To apply the metaphysical imagination model to teach students an appreciation of nature.

Keywords: Hepburn, natural aesthetics, metaphysical imagination, aesthetic education

1. Introduction

The world is rich in natural beauty. People can touch natural beauty in daily life, but seldom do they appreciate it fully. Although learning how to appreciate environmental beauty is important to aesthetic education, teachers tend to focus on the arts, and not on nature. Instead, we should cultivate students' perceptual awareness of and sensitivity to the aesthetics of nature so that their lives may be enriched and their awareness of environmental issues may be raised. How the aesthetics of nature can be taught effectively remains a question. However, research in contemporary aesthetics of nature provides insightful discussions and directions.

There are two approaches to teaching the aesthetics of nature. One is the cognitive approach, such as those proposed by Carlson (2002), Eaton (2004), and Rolston (1998); and the other is the non-cognitive approach, as espoused by Hepburn (2004b), Berleant (1997), Carroll (2004), Godlovitch (2004), and Brady (2003). In Carlson's view appreciation for the environmental aesthetics must be based on a knowledge of the natural sciences, such as geology, geography, biology and ecology. Sciences can lead to the discovery of the qualities of natural beauty, such as order, regularity, harmony, balance, and persistence. Carlson's theory (which he terms the "natural environmental model") is a well-known scientific cognitive paradigm, however, some scholars do not agree with Carlson's theory and, instead, stress engagement (or immersion), emotion, mystery, and the imagination. Such debates involve the meaning of science, cognition, emotions, the imagination, and aesthetic experience, which enrich research in the aesthetics of nature.

Among these scholars, Hepburn occupies a unique position in his contribution of a creative view. According to Brady, Hepburn is "the father of environmental aesthetics, who set out most of the problems and issues people

are now writing about. He was the first key figure and an enduring one" (introduced from Reisz, 2009). His seminal work "Contemporary aesthetics and the neglect of natural beauty" (1966) has inspired contemporary research on the aesthetics of nature. Known as the "metaphysical imagination model." Hepburn's theory occupies a significant place in the field of aesthetics.

Hepburn suggests that metaphysical significance can be revealed by imagination in nature. According to his model, the essence of the "reality" of nature should be contemplated. We can imagine the meaning of life and experience a sense of oneness with nature, a co-presence of opposites, sublimity, and infinity by appreciating the beauty of nature. Such aesthetic principles and insights will be discussed later. Here, three goals of environmental aesthetics learning are presented.

2. Metaphysical Imagination Model

2.1 Meaning of Imagination

Is an appreciation of nature similar to art appreciation? Hepburn, as well as several other scholars, reject the application of an arts model to environmental aesthetics, based on three points distinguishing environmental and artistic appreciation (Hepburn, 2004a, pp. 45-47).

First, when contemplating the beauty of a natural setting, the viewer is surrounded by the environment and enveloped in natural objects. If in the forest, the viewer is surrounded by trees and involved in the natural aesthetic situation. However, when appreciating the arts, the viewer is detached from the object. Therefore, in nature, people are spectators and actors playing a game of the imagination and using multisensory organs in their aesthetic experience.

Second, the arts are constrained by frames, whereas nature is not. In drama and musical performances, the audience is separated from the stage, and poetry is restricted by the print layout that separates the title, pages, and footnotes. The features of the arts are determined by their structure and the interaction of their various elements. Objects in nature, however, are frameless, which allows us to experience surprises in perception and sudden expansions of the imagination.

Third, because nature is frameless, its aesthetic features are indeterminate. Influenced by changes in visual context, a tree growing on a steep hill slope may strike us as tenacious or delightful, depending on whether it is viewed near or afar. Since the angle of vision constantly changes, the aesthetic features of natural objects also change. Such temporary and unpredictable aesthetic features create endless, alert, and boundless new perspectives. The arts, on the other hand, are restricted by boundaries and contexts, and aesthetic features created by artificial lines and colors are determinate generally.

These three differences proposed by Hepburn explain only the distinct features separating nature and the arts. They do not explain why appreciating nature under the art model is flawed. However, if we cannot appreciate nature in the same way as we appreciate the arts, then how should we appreciate nature? For Hepburn, metaphysics and the imagination are appropriate foundations for such an appreciation.

Hepburn's interest in metaphysics can be traced to his early research. While studying the philosophy of religion, Hepburn found that the metaphysical notion of "Being" may be applied to aesthetics. As St. Thomas stated, "beauty is Being itself, Being is a transcendental aspect of beauty." Hepburn, however, is not interested in this type of religious explanation. Instead, he partially accepts Heidegger's view of the mysticism of Being. He agrees with Jaeger's view that natural objects such as peaks and treetops are what they are as points of direction toward something beyond themselves. "The non-existent in existing reality is Being". Such experiences of non-existence can be found in the contemplation of objects (Hepburn, 1968, pp. 138-140, 143-144). Accordingly, we should contemplate nature and derive the meaning of Being or "non-existence," and this requires the aid of the imagination.

Hepburn (2004b, pp. 128-129) indicates that metaphysical imagination is relevant to the overall experience of those who appreciate a natural landscape. It prompts meditation on the meaning of nature and the essence of the world. We would see or imagine natural objects as other things which link to metaphysics. It is based on substantial theory and distinct from fleeting fancy. For Hepburn, we can make a connection to metaphysical concepts about "how the world ultimately is" or to human nature by expanding the imagination. Following Kant, Hepburn also insists that the imagination is central to an aesthetic appreciation of nature. The imagination frees the mind from the limits of intellectual and practical interests and enables a play of associations and creative reflection about natural objects. Imagination can shift attention from one aspect to another aspect of natural objects and overcome stereotyped grouping and routine ways of seeing. It makes us reach beyond the present experience of sense perception and leads to the discovery of new aesthetic qualities (Brady, 2003, pp. 74, 147).

In sum, metaphysical imagination is a creative and powerful way to produce deep aesthetic perception by imagining the essence of natural things.

Imagination, however, is different from illusion or fantasy. Hepburn says that we want our experience to relate to nature as it "really" is. We use the word "realize" to express such an idea. I may "know" that the earth is round, but I "realize" its curvature when I watch a ship disappear on the horizon. As Hepburn (2004a, pp. 55-56) explains:

> If I suddenly realize the height of a cumulo-nimbus cloud I am not simply *taking note* of the height, but imagining myself climbing into the cloud in an airplane or falling through I, or I am superimposing upon it an image of a mountain of known vastness…Auxiliary imagings may likewise attend my realizing of the earth's curvature… and the loneliness may involve imagining myself shouting but being unheard, needing help but getting none.

"Realize" involves making or allowing to become vivid to our perception or to the imagination. It has an essential episodic component, namely, a coming-to-be-aware, or a "clock-able" experience. This kind of realization is one of our chief activities while experiencing the aesthetics of nature. If I mistake a massive cumulus cloud in the distance as a snowy mountain, I will downgrade my aesthetic experience (Hepburn, 2004a, pp. 55-56; 2004b, p. 128). Accordingly, imagination involves realizing, thinking, and transferring, a fusing together. It allows us to grasp or touch the "real" qualities or the "Being" of natural objects, but in the metaphysical rather than the scientific sense. Scientific truth may differ from philosophical truth. "Truth" is multiple in the appreciation of the beauty of nature.

For Hepburn, poetic metaphors reveal the poet's imagination for grapes of the "invisible world" or the "world of spirit". Metaphors are a kind of presence of imagination that allows us to apprehend the implied meaning of words. We may see the desert as bleak emptiness, openness, or potentiality (Hepburn, 1993, pp. 73-74). However, sometimes we cannot find any words to express our imagination in nature. We may perceive complex, enigmatic, and ineffable feelings and understanding. It may is the highest realm of metaphysical imagination.

2.2 Four Imagination Characters of Nature

Hepburn proposes several ways to appreciate or disclose natural beauty in the metaphysical imagination. Since the meaning behind Hepburn's words at times requires interpretation, some main points of his work are explained below. (Hepburn, 2002, pp. 29-32; 2004b, pp. 133-138):

(1) Unity, or oneness: We can enjoy its beauty as towards an ideal of "oneness with nature" or "unity". Unity or oneness is the key aesthetic principle in the aesthetics of nature (2004a, pp. 48-49). Although "unity" is mentioned in Hepburn's earlier works (1968, 2004a), this idea is used more consistently in his later work (2004b). There are three meanings associated with being "one with nature":

a. To enjoy properties that we share with nature. We can contemplate perceptible analogies between our life and nature. A branching stem or leaf patterns are like our blood vessels; the calm rhythm of waves are similar to the steady rhythm of our breathing. Nature's life is our life. We can enjoy such chiming, resonating, reconciling, and rhyming forms. This is type of response is much more emotional than that of intellectual cognition. Furthermore, "unity or oneness" may appear in analogies between natural objects. We may see hills as the waves of a tumultuous sea, or high cirrus clouds as sea sand dibbed by the tide (Hepburn, 1993, p. 76).

b. To experience a sense of equilibrium. This refers to "a suspension of conflict with nature, of threat, even of causal engagement". However, we cannot see equilibrium as the telos of the world. In Hepburn's view, this may mean that however nature changes, it will maintain balance automatically. Equilibrium can also be viewed as both abstract and concrete elements of appreciation.

c. To experience a mystic sense. Distinctions between the subject and the object disappear in the appreciation of nature. God-world distinctions are also overcome. Oneness is a form of "monism" or "pantheism"—all is in God. This mystic sense may direct subjects toward a sense of unity of humanity and with the cosmos. For example, the great polar explorer Byrd experienced a sense of harmony and peace and felt the gentle rhythm and music of the spheres as if he were part of the cosmos while in the presence of the Ross Ice Shelf in, Antarctica. In some instances, he felt no doubt about the individual's oneness with the universe (Tuan, 1993, pp. 152-153). Such experiences may be difficult to achieve in our daily lives. However, it would be easier to achieve in an isolated and expansive place where the mind can calm down.

(2) Co-presence of opposites or paradoxical union: We may find that some contrary qualities are present in the same natural objects. Calm and excitement, tranquility and vitality, and stillness and motion can be experienced simultaneously in the appreciation of nature. For example, while looking at a stone, we can image a great rock

falling down a mountainside centuries ago. It is so still when we contemplate the great old rock next to mountain. But meanwhile, we can also see its great potential vitality or energy. It is calm but vital. We can see the co-presence of life and stillness in the great stone. In the context of our normal experiences, increasing stillness means decreasing vitality, and what enhances our lives diminishes our tranquility. But these opposite qualities can coexist while appreciating nature. As I look at the full moon, I have a sense of its spherical nature and feel it floating in space. Then, I turn back to look at the land or the sea, I have a sense of the earth as also floating in space. It is a kind of formal unity, and "there is a sense of the two spheres over against each other, in a silent opposition" (Hepburn, 2002, p. 31). Such synthetic contemplation allows us to enjoy great and magical aesthetic pleasure.

(3) Sublimity: This is also an important aesthetic element that allows us to describe "a memorable, powerful, and perplexing range of experiences". We feel a solemn aesthetic delight or exhilaration and meanwhile, dread overwhelming energies of nature and vastness of space and time, when contemplating a strong storm before us. As Rolston states, sublime is a kind of grand and provocative force that touch heights and depths beyond normal experience. It is both attractive and threatening for us (Rolston, 1998, pp. 162-163). We should keep enough and save distance when appreciate grand or powerful natural objects.

(4) Infinity: For some Romantics, the idea of infinity is a powerful source of good energy and vitality. Hegel saw infinity as the power to light up the heart and mind. When we contemplate a sunlit landscape or a calm night sky, we can achieve such an experience of infinity. We may feel serene, but sometimes see it as a nightmare if we relate it to the never-completable and demonically unreachable goal. As Ruskin says, the night sky is a studded vault that seems to shut us in and down. It is dark. But we can see its infinite bright distance, rejoice in its purity of light. For Rolston, to engage in a forest makes us feel a kind of timelessness, duration, antiquity and continuity, even eternity (Rolston, 1998, p. 160). Infinity make us touch and think essence of "being" of the world.

To sum up Hepburn's thoughts, metaphysical imagination is necessary for achieving a deep aesthetic experience in the appreciation of nature. Hepburn does not reject the scientific or religious model of aesthetic appreciation; he merely stresses that his model is equally important. As Brady says, we seek to engage with nature as "other" through this metaphysical imagination model. We will understand some ideas concerning our relationship to nature and reality (or essence) of nature, and the cosmos are brought to life or make our lives more vivid (Brady, 2003, p. 106). Hepburn provides deep, rich, and inspiring insights to guide our appreciation of nature. Carlson appears to agree that Hepburn's model is profound and inspiring. He also supports that finding the true or real nature of the natural world is important for such an appreciation. However, he does not think that this can be achieved through metaphysics. Following his "natural environment model", Carlson indicates that the natural sciences is most successful for inquiring about the true characters of nature and the individual's place in nature (Carlson, 2002, p. 11). Accordingly, science is more successful than philosophy in inquiring about truth. But is this "true"? Can Carlson's view be "justified"? Insisting that (aesthetic) truth can be obtained only through science is unreasonable and arrogant. The natural sciences cannot replace human and social sciences. Truth is multiple and complex. As M. Greene says, "reality" is multiple. There is no objective truth. We can never complete construction for "reality" and "truth" of human and society. Art and philosohy can make us to explore these complex elements and not fall into one-dimentional thinking (Greene, 1995, pp. 95-96). Each type of academic subject can disclose some aspects of truth about the world.

Though Carlson's criticism is failed, Hepburn's words and explanations are equally ambiguous and abstract, and they hinder our understanding. Some concepts like "sublimity" and "infinity" are also too close to religious doctrine and difficult to apprehend. Furthermore, Hepburn warns us that overly pursuing resemblance or analogy may trivialize aesthetic appreciation as, for example, seeing a stalagmite as the Virgin Mary, which can be a falsely comforting simplification and idealization of nature. The combination of intelligibility and opacity (or arbitrariness, non-intelligibility) are characteristics of serious aesthetic appreciation (Hepburn, 1993, p. 76). However, when and what counts as a simplification and idealization of nature? If we imagine a tree as a smile or a kind old man, it's wrong to natural appreciation? Why is imagining branching stems and leaf patterns as our blood vessels considered correct or a "serious" mode of appreciation? The distinction between trivial and serious appreciation still appears to be unclear. Besides, imagination may exaggerate or distort facts, and becomes just personal fantasy as that it will lead to misunderstand nature. For example, we may image swamps are so dirty and terrible that impede our appreciation for their rich ecology. However, Hepburn's insights still affords us rich implications for aesthetic education.

3. Implications for Aesthetic Education

Most teachers may appreciate nature and agree about its value, but they seldom know how to teach the aesthetics

of nature. They will explain little beyond the colors, shapes, and structure of a flower when teaching the beauty of nature. If teachers know how to apply the imagination, the students' ability to appreciate nature can be enhanced. Based on the ideas presented, there are three implications for aesthetic education:

3.1 To Teach Students How to Appreciate Natural Beauty should be Included in Aesthetic Education

Most schools in Taiwan seldom teach students how to appreciate the beauty of nature. Aesthetic education is similar to arts education. Art courses in Taiwan focus on how to make and appreciate art, but not on environmental appreciation. Hepburn mentioned that if a person's aesthetic education fails to distinguish between art appreciation and nature appreciation, taking the arts as the only model for appreciation, such a person will pay little heed to the aesthetics of natural objects. The person may notice them in the wrong way by exploring what can be found and enjoyed only in art, being unable to find more appropriate and richer ways to appreciate nature (Hepburn, 2004a, p. 48). Indeed, students seldom have the opportunity and ability to appreciate natural beauty in Taiwan. The natural world is vaster than the world of art. We may touch the sky, sea, mountains, forests, trees, flowers, and animals, everywhere in our daily lives. But we seldom have the opportunity to appreciate the arts. Why do we teach only art appreciation? A complete aesthetic education should include the appreciation of natural objects, as well as arts.

We learn about nature only in the natural sciences from elementary to high school. But the curricula of the natural sciences focus only on teaching knowledge of the elements and structure of nature. Teachers strive to explain how natural systems operate and according to what principles, and not how nature can be appreciated. We may learn how to understand elements, and the structures and types of plants, animals, coasts, deserts, the North Pole, oceans and clouds, but we still do not know how to appreciate them. Teachers of other subjects (including arts) teach only knowledge about their fields, they do not need to explore the topic of the beauty of nature. Unfortunately, in such conditions, the cultivation of students' ability to appreciate nature is neglected.

The appreciation for nature is multisensory and unframed, thus we can feel and contemplate indeterminate and rich aesthetic qualities. In this way, nature can inspire and enrich our perception, making our minds and lives more vivid. This kind of natural experience cannot be replaced by the arts or by other educational activities and curricula (Yang, 2011). In the aesthetic appreciation of nature, sometimes we connect the appreciation to our personal experiences, including thought, affection, value, living background, and cultural background. This kind of aesthetic experience arises from the interaction between human life and nature. All of these elements should be included in the teaching of aesthetic education and environmental education.

3.2 To Rich Meanings of Life by Imagination in Natural Appreciation

We should engage with the natural environment instead of learning about them through textbooks. Aesthetic education should also be implemented in the setting of the natural world to supply background knowledge that is helpful. However, teachers usually think that to be in touch with nature or the wild will take too much time, and they prefer to remain in the classroom. Because of administrative considerations of time, budget, traffic, safety, and the competence of teachers, schools, especially those in urban areas, seldom organize nature field trips. Elementary schools may have one field trip each semester, but this usually takes place in amusement parks, where the focus is on play, and not on environmental appreciation.

Education in aesthetic sensitivity involves an engagement of the senses, feeling, cognition, body, and the imagination. Generally, teachers will teach students to appreciate forms, shapes, colors, types, and stances of natural objects. Focusing only on appearances is, however, too superficial. We may offer related scientific knowledge to give students a deeper understanding of aesthetic appreciation. However, we should take a step further to introduce them into the world of the imagination. As Brady and Hepburn indicate, imagination is not fantasy, it is connected to beliefs and thoughts. According to Brady, the imagination moves us beyond perceptual qualities to fly toward metaphors and philosophical contemplation, poetic and novel engagement with the world, expanding and opening up new horizons of experience, and enriching it with meaning. Imaginative contemplation or awareness can lead us to discover more aesthetic values in nature, which can be an effective foundation for cultivating a moral attitude of respect for and protection of the environment (Brady, 2003, pp. 216-219). Brady stresses the function of the imagination, and provides four modes of imaginative activity in relation to natural objects: exploratory, projective, ampliative, and revelatory imagination (Brady, 2003, pp. 162-163). If I go to a forest, I may stand before an old tree and imagine how it looks and when comes to here. I may imagine that the tree has been subjected to typhoons, earthquakes, rainstorms, and other disasters numerous times over hundreds of years, and yet it still strives to survive. I may imagine its mood and feeling and that it wants to talk to me. All of these imaginations enrich my feeling and thinking, allowing me to gain a new experience about a tree or a forest. Then I may find that the old tree is a beautiful, strong, respectful, and

precious form of life. Teachers should avoid introduce students to negative or terrible fantasy to impede appreciation.

3.3 To Apply the Metaphysical Imagination Model to Teach Students an Appreciation of Nature

According to Hepburn's "metaphysical imagination model", we should imagine characters of oneness, the co-presence of opposites, sublimity, and infinity when appreciating nature. In reality, we can just breathe the fresh air, feel the warm sunlight, listen to sound of waterfalls by sensation and intuition, without thinking in nature. But that is not enough if we want to gain a deeper aesthetic experience.

Educators should teach students to imagine, for example, that our body and conscience disappear when we close eyes to feel the fresh air of a forest. There is no distance and distinction between us and the trees. We can imagine trees speaking to us when watching them. As mentioned above, I can also see the co-presence of life and stillness in the great stone. I may imagine trees talking to each other, though they seem silent. Trees and flowers are still but also vivid.

Again, we may encounter great forces that touch heights and depths beyond our normal experience, making us feel a sense of the sublime. Furthermore, we see the sublimity and the beauty of plants from the struggle for life in the forest. As for infinity, we may feel a sense of awe, humility, and sacredness in the forest. Contemplating the forest may elicit questions concerning the cosmos, the meanings of life and the human being's roles in this world (Rolston, 1998, pp. 163-166). We can also feel a sense of infinity when looking at the stars in the sky. We may then associate these experiences with the poetry of the Tang Dynasty poet CHEN Zi'ang (Note 1), and Nimagine his pain, his political oppression, and reflect on the meaning of life. We may find that there are many valuable things in our lives beyond politics. Nature is ancient, marvelous, and timeless, and it make us realize the infinity of the universe. The highest level perhaps is what is said in Chinese philosophy, being one with nature and in correspondence with nature. When we see that everything in nature has value in itself and is of equal importance with human beings, and when we praise the beauty of nature, we are better equipped to practice environmental protection. Teaching students to appreciate nature in these ways will allow them to learn much more than in other courses. Teachers can ask students to write, paint, or compose a piece of music after activities involving the appreciation of nature. We may find their creative imagination is beyond our expectations.

4. Conclusion

Hepburn suggests that metaphysical imagination can lead us toward a deeper appreciation of nature. Imagination involves sensations and cognition, and thus cannot be considered a subjective fantasy. We should extend the imagination to involve characters of oneness, the co-presence of opposites, sublimity, and infinity of natural objects during the process of appreciation. In this way, we can obtain a more profound and delightful aesthetic experience.

As E. W. Eisner suggests, the most important thing is to raise interest in students and make them gain intrinsic satisfaction in school. "The aims of the educational process inside schools is not to finish something, but to start something" (Eisner, 2002, p. 90). If we can teach students how to appreciate the beauty of nature in aesthetic education, using Hepburn's model to extend our aesthetic experience, we will produce greater "aesthetic intelligence" and "ecological wisdom" (Bowers, 1995, p. 317). This can help enrich the students' aesthetic literacy, and create in them a desire to protect our beautiful environment continually, even when they grow and become world citizens.

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Note

Note 1. The poem is "Up on Youzhou Watch Tower" (Betty Tseng translate, 2011):

Those of the past were before my time,

Who would be there in future I know not;

I think of how heaven and earth continue on perpetually,

Alone I dwell in sorrow and down flow my tears.

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